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AUTHOR Walker, Pam
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ABSTRACT

This case study describes Project RESCUE (Refer, Evaluate, Support, Coordinate, Uncover, and Educate), an agency providing support to children and adults with developmental disabilities in Fulton and DeKalb counties in and around Atlanta, Georgia. Project RESCUE's mission is to assist people in four areas: (1) to identify and obtain community resources; (2) to become as self-sufficient as possible; (3) to minimize exploitation; and (4) to experience meaningful community participation. Services provided include in-home assistance; service coordination; assistance in obtaining housing, clothing, food, and furniture; transportation; support in job or recreation settings; counseling; and support groups. The case study describes administration and funding; staff roles and staff training; ongoing support and assistance; and agency issues and challenges, including values issues, issues of race and oppression, poverty issues, women's issues, and service system issues. Anecdotal reports are included about some of the individuals and families that Project RESCUE has assisted. (JDD)

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ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE:

PROJECT RESCUE HELPING DREAMS BECOME REALITY IN INNER-CITY ATLANTA

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ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE:
Project RESCUE Helping Dreams Become Reality in Inner-City Atlanta

Pam Walker
Research and Training Center on Community Integration
Center on Human Policy
200 Huntington Hall, 2nd Floor
Syracuse, NY 13244-2340
315-443-3851

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This is one in a series of reports on programs and services that support people with severe disabilities in the community. The purpose of the series is not to evaluate programs or services, but rather to describe innovative practices in integrating people with disabilities into community life.

ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE:
Project RESCUE Helping Dreams Become
Reality in Inner-City Atlanta

INTRODUCTION

This case study is about Project RESCUE, an agency providing support to children and adults with developmental disabilities in Fulton and DeKalb counties in and around Atlanta, Georgia. The letters in the word RESCUE stand for broad roles the agency plays: to Refer, Evaluate, Support, Coordinate, Uncover, and Educate. This report on Project RESCUE is based on a 4-day site visit to the agency on September 28-October 1, 1988, which included observations and interviews with numerous Project RESCUE staff members and people to whom they provide support. The purpose of the visit was to document positive practices in supporting people with developmental disabilities. It reflects the agency as it was only at the time of the visit, and not any changes which may have been made since that time.

BACKGROUND

Mission

Project RESCUE began in 1969 as a Model Cities program. The purpose or mission of the agency is to assist people with developmental disabilities in four primary areas: (1) to identify and obtain community resources; (2) to become as self-sufficient as possible; (3) to minimize exploitation; and (4) to experience meaningful community participation. This translates into the provision of a wide range of services and supports, including: in-home assistance (typically ranging from a few to several hours per week); service coordination; assisting in obtaining

housing, clothing, food, furniture; transportation; support in job cr recreation settings; counseling; and support groups. The agency does not provide live-in residential assistance, although it will help people find roommates. The agency's philosophy is to support individuals and families to achieve positive recognition, and to have the opportunity to make choices and to exercise their human and civil rights.

Administration and Funding

Project RESCUE is currently funded primarily through a contract with the state Department of Human Resources. This includes a Social Service block grant from the federal government, and a state match for that grant. The agency falls under the administrative umbrella of Retarded Citizens/Atlanta. However, within this structure, Project RESCUE functions almost autonomously on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to the Department of Human Resources, funding for Project RESCUE comes from various other grants and donations, from the state, private organizations such as hospitals, sororities, business and industry, and individual people.

Staff Roles and Staff Training

The agency employs 17 full-time staff members, and one part-time staff member. The primary direct support is provided by "outreach workers," who provide a wide range of direct support to people with disabilities, doing "whatever needs to be done." In addition, their role is defined as one of "connecting people to resources, and/or the development of resources." "Outreach supervisors" oversee

the two teams of outreach workers; and an "intensive trainer" does more specialized skills training with some people. There are a number of other types of program support staff including office workers, a psychologist, a coordinator of volunteer services, three people who focus on assisting people to find jobs, and a person in charge of staff development. Approximately half of the staff members have been employed with Project RESCUE for 5 or more years.

In hiring staff, the primary emphasis is put on personal characteristics or qualities versus academic qualifications. The agency seeks staff members who will be committed to people and treat them with dignity and respect, as well as those who have community connections themselves and will have the ability to help those they assist in forming connections and relationships. Project RESCUE provides 80-120 hours of staff development per year, more than is required by state regulations.

Staff training focuses on both philosophy and strategy related to promoting normalization and community integration. This training is sometimes provided by staff members themselves, or professional consultants working in the field of development disabilities (for example, Marc Gold's "Try Another Way" techniques of skills training). In addition, however, an agency staff member stressed the importance of bringing in a variety of other community members as part of staff training, in order to educate themselves about broader community issues (not just disability issues) and to assist staff in gaining increased knowledge about other services and resources outside of the disability service system. Staff retreats are scheduled on a regular basis for staff members to reflect together on successes and

challenges or dilemmas they face in their work and/or lives, to share perspectives and feelings about issues, and "to keep people's energy up."

ONGOING SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE

Who the Agency Supports

Project RESCUE offers support to 115 people who live in a variety of situations, including children and adults who live with their families, or adults who live with roommates or in their own apartments. All of the people the agency serves are very poor, and live in inner-city areas.

People who receive support from the agency have labels ranging from mild to profound mental retardation. A high percentage of these people also have mental health labels and/or additional medical and physical disabilities. Twenty of the people served are mothers labeled mentally retarded. Most of the adults with severe and/or multiple disabilities whom the agency supports live with their families. In the Atlanta area, there are virtually no community-based residential services. Therefore, for people with severe disabilities, the only alternative to living with their family is the Georgia Retardation Center.

The current funding of Project RESCUE is designated for services for people with mental retardation. Because of a state level policy, services to children that are provided with state funding cannot include skills training for the children. However, if agency staff see a need for specific training, they try to provide it through use of volunteer time. In addition, while only one person in a setting may be labeled as developmentally disabled, and therefore the only "official" person receiving assistance

from Project RESCUE, agency staff often provide support to other children and adults in the setting.

Since 1987, staff at Project RESCUE have made a conscious effort to reduce the number of people they serve in order to provide those they do support with a higher quality of support. For example, each outreach worker used to assist approximately 22 families; now that number is down to about 15. They have tried to do this primarily by limiting the numbers of new families. In addition, they are also examining instances in which they might be supporting people who really don't want Project RESCUE to be involved in their lives.

This, however, has not been an easy thing to do. As one staff member put it, "We have dilemmas about staying small, about not serving people who really need it." They also have difficulty determining when to discontinue providing services, since they have found that "many of the situations in which we were about to give up, but then kept trying, become some of the most rewarding."

As one alternative, staff refer people to other resources and social service agencies. But, they have significant frustration due to the general lack of other resources, the segregated nature of most all of the services that do exist, and the discrimination and bias of these service providers in that "they won't serve many of the people we refer."

Determining What Kinds of Support to Provide

Once a person is determined eligible for services, Project RESCUE staff do an assessment to determine what type of services and supports are needed and

wanted by the individual or family. According to one staff member, "a large part of the assessment involves observing people in their own environments." The agency has developed a checklist to provide staff members with a guideline of broad areas to assess. This checklist has several categories, the first of which is called "basic survival," and includes food, clothing, shelter, safety, and income. The remaining categories--"special challenges," "parenting and family," and "other"--cover areas such as whether the person lives in an abusive, exploitative, or overprotective environment; physical and emotional challenges and the stigma that may be attached to these; substance abuse; deinstitutionalization; the basic survival needs, and other needs of people for whom the person with a disability is responsible, such as children, siblings, or others; self-advocacy; medical needs; other special needs; legal rights; relationship needs; school/job, and religion, and recreation/leisure.

In order to determine more specifically what types of skills the person has and may need in different areas, staff of Project RESCUE conduct more in-depth skill assessment in areas such as social interaction, communication, cleanliness, shopping, personal information, taking own medications, taking care of medical needs, use of community services, transportation/mobility, use of leisure time, and so forth. If skill deficits exist in certain areas, further assessment may be done using other assessment tools.

After the assessments are completed, the Outreach Supervisor compiles a "Personal Plan" for each individual. This includes information gained from the assessments as well as a social history of the person--based on visits to the person,

his or her records, and conversations with others who have known him or her--and initial ideas about possible ways to provide support.

For purposes of their funders, Project RESCUE staff record priority goals for each person to work on as part of the personal service plan. This must be updated semi-annually at a program plan review meeting. The people who receive supports from the agency are very involved in the determination of these goals. Staff members report that they begin figuring this out by asking the person, "What would you like to work on; what's most important for you?" There is the recognition that a person's choice and motivation are important factors. As one staff member commented, "It's real hard to teach somebody something they don't want to learn."

Overall, in the development of goals and service plans, Project RESCUE staff members challenge themselves to figure out how best to help people achieve the things they want and desire to achieve. One of the ways they do this is by spending time as a staff "dreaming" with people about their needs and desires for the future and possible ways that Project RESCUE staff can help them work toward these. A second way that staff challenge themselves to develop creative, individualized service plans is to try to include someone in the process who is not involved in the direct support of that person.

Basic Survival Needs Come First: The Story of Teresa Brown[1]

One of the people who receives support from Project RESCUE is Teresa Brown, a 28 year old woman who lives with her mother, Dorothy, in one of Atlanta's public housing projects. Two years ago they moved from Cincinnati to Atlanta; according to a staff member at Project RESCUE, this was a means for Dorothy to escape an abusive relationship with a man there. One of Teresa's sisters, Evelyn, also lives in Atlanta, with her boyfriend. However, most of their eight other siblings still reside in the Cincinnati area.

Before they left Ohio, Dorothy, who has numerous physical and medical problems, was hospitalized for a few months. During that time, Teresa, who is labeled severely mentally retarded, was placed in an institution. There, according to her mother, she lost some self-help skills such as feeding herself independently and using the toilet. Once Dorothy got out of the hospital, she took Teresa out of the institution and they moved. Upon arrival in Atlanta, they first stayed with Evelyn and her boyfriend. This was a difficult arrangement due to both shortage of space and tension between family members. Eventually, Teresa and Dorothy wound up in a shelter for homeless people. After a few months in the shelter, they were asked to leave because, according to a staff member, others at the sheltered objected to having Teresa there. It was at this point that they were referred to Project RESCUE.

Staff members at Project RESCUE first helped Teresa and Dorothy find housing, get public assistance, and get some furniture from the Salvation Army. An

[1]All names used throughout this report are pseudonyms.

outreach worker from the agency, Joanne, assists Teresa and Dorothy with numerous ongoing needs and difficulties in their life. She spends time with them at least once a week, and often more, assisting with things such as getting food from the church food banks, budgeting, and transportation for Dorothy to her frequent doctor's appointments. In order to best assist them, Joanne draws on her own resources and knowledge, as well as those of other agency staff. In addition to Joanne, the intensive trainer from Project RESCUE has spent time helping Teresa regain her eating skills and is working with her on toileting now.

Some of Joanne's primary concerns about Teresa and her mother include the following:

First, although they do have housing, the place they live is a bare, drab apartment located in what Project RESCUE staff refer to as a "war zone." It is a public housing project where there is significant drug activity and related violence. As Dorothy describes it, "Sometimes you can hear the shooting around here...I'm afraid one day they're going to come right in here, or we'll get shot sitting here...I've had us both sleeping right down on the floor when it gets bad out...I don't like this neighborhood...we just stay inside."

Second, though they get some public assistance, it is still difficult for them to make ends meet, and they have a continuing need for donations of food from the churches. In addition, staff members feel that Evelyn may be contributing to financial problems by borrowing money from Dorothy and not returning it.

Third, Teresa does not have anything to do during the day, and just stays home with her mother all of the time. Staff at Project RESCUE have not yet had

time to direct significant energy toward looking for work for Teresa. As Joanne put it, "It's hard to work on finding a program when people don't have food."

Finally, Dorothy needs someone to spend time with Teresa while she (Dorothy) is out at her relatively frequent doctor's appointments. Harriet, one of the outreach supervisors, knows a woman who lives nearby who seems interested in doing this, and Joanne will help this woman get to know Dorothy and Teresa.

Flexibility of Supports: Assisting Gwen

One of the people that Project RESCUE's intensive trainer, Karen, has been working with for about a year is Gwen. In addition, Gwen receives ongoing support from Marj, who is an outreach worker. Gwen just moved from a run down apartment to the much more well-kept up one she lives in now. The agency helped her move into this place, in particular, because "she had expressed a desire to move, and a desire to have a one bedroom apartment, not an efficiency." Gwen, who is 25 years old, is labeled as mildly mentally retarded, and has also been involved with the mental health system. Karen feels that Gwen is fortunate to have a really good mental health counselor, and notes that she used to take 200 mg. of thorazine a day, but now takes only 25 mg.

When Karen first started coming, Gwen was hesitant to let her in. As Karen put it, "I had to keep coming back and back until she trusted me...She had had so many people in her life who had come and gone...Also, she was afraid of the neighborhood where she lived, she wouldn't leave her apartment...she used to spend a lot of time sleeping and crying."

According to staff at Project RESCUE, when they first began providing support to Gwen, some of the things she wanted to do were: move into a one-bedroom apartment, be her own payee, decrease her isolation, ride the city bus, read, and use money. Karen began working with Gwen specifically on money handling and management skills. However, the majority of their time together now centers around learning to read, since Gwen has decided that this is a priority for her.

Karen currently spends a few hours with Gwen two or three times each week. Their work together on reading is approached in a number of different ways. Gwen attends church regularly and has become interested in reading Bible stories; so, Karen and Gwen spend some time together doing this. Also, Karen and Gwen spend time exploring Gwen's neighborhood together, and Karen is helping Gwen with "functional reading," such as signs for shops, grocery products, household supplies, and so forth. In connection with the reading, one community resource they plan to explore together in Gwen's new neighborhood is the local library. Currently, Karen drives Gwen there, but would like to help her learn her way by foot or bus so she can go there on her own. In order to come up with ideas about things to do with Gwen, Karen comments, "I try to think of things that tie in with her interests."

In addition to reading, Karen is involved with Gwen in a number of other ways. Currently, Gwen's sister is her payee. Eventually, Karen would like to help Gwen become her own payee. At this point, Karen has gotten to know the sister, and based on this relationship, the sister gives them money so Karen and Gwen can

go shopping together. They have purchased some furnishings for the apartment, and are still looking for others. Also, on occasion they have gone shopping for clothes.

Gwen has some contact with both her mother, her sister, and her brother, though, according to Karen, this contact is not real positive for Gwen. Within the context of these relationships, Karen feels that Gwen would benefit if she were more assertive about her own needs, so Karen helps encourage Gwen to "speak up for herself." Gwen has a particularly close relationship with her grandmother. In fact, one of the reasons that Gwen chose this particular apartment is its proximity to her grandmother's residence. Staff encourage and assist Gwen to maintain contact with her grandmother.

Staff from Project RESCUE have assisted Gwen in other ways also. For example, her outreach worker, Marj, assisted her to decorate and prepare for Christmas this year. And, Marj also helped find funds that made it possible for her to go on a trip to Florida with a group from the church that she attends. Overall, there are still other things that can be done to assist Gwen to learn more skills, develop more self-confidence, and have more meaningful relationships and experiences in her life. But, as Karen reports, "Gwen has come a long way."

Supports to Mothers Labeled Mentally Retarded: Ginny Davis

Ginny Davis, in her early 30s, is a single parent of two children, Valerie who is 10 years old and Michael who is 4 years old. Ginny is also labeled mildly mentally retarded. Bonnie is her Project RESCUE outreach worker. According to Bonnie,

Ginny and her sister, Debby, used to live in a rural area outside of Atlanta with their mother. Ginny, her two children, and Debby came to Atlanta when their mother died. Debby, who has a label of moderate mental retardation, has a child who was placed in foster care when their mother died and who remained in that placement when Debby moved. Now that they have a place to live, and some financial assistance, Ginny wants to help Debby get her child back, and have the child live with them so she can help Debby take care of the baby.

Bonnie has assisted them to move into a housing project and find day-care for Michael, and she helped Ginny get a job bagging groceries at Kroger's. Before this, Ginny worked at a vocational rehabilitation center for people with disabilities. While Ginny likes her job at Kroger's, she also talks about a desire to try other things, such as cosmetology or photography. Bonnie encourages Ginny to think of things she might like to try out, and is currently helping her figure out where introductory courses in these topics are offered and how to enroll in them.

Supporting Families: The Raymonds

The Raymond family includes Andrea and her two sons, Joe and Ed. Joe and Ed are both labeled developmentally disabled; Andrea is not, but has had mental health problems and problems with alcohol. Until recently, Joe, who is 22 years old, lived with his mother. But, staff had a number of concerns about this. They felt that the house was unclean, he didn't eat properly, his hygiene was poor, and he seemed to have little structure or responsibility built into his days. It seemed Joe and Andrea both seemed ready for a change, so staff helped him move into a

rooming house run by a woman who, according to staff, is "very supportive" of him. Since his move, there have been a number of other changes in his life. His outreach worker, Bonnie, helped him find a job at a local laundromat and learn the bus route there. He is currently learning how to get up on time independently. Staff note that now he has new clothes for the first time, a bed with clean sheets, running water, and a clean house. He has also been spending some time doing recreational activities with agency volunteer students, including going camping and on bicycle trips. Overall, agency staff feel that, in addition to the changes in his environment and daily activities, he has had a significant personal transformation. As they note, he has changed from "holding his head down, and not looking or speaking to you, to standing tall, looking in your eyes, and speaking."

Since the agency is not funded to provide supports for Andrea or Ed, it is through use of volunteers that the agency has in fact supported them in a number of significant ways. Andrea had a fire in the house she was living in, and thus has moved to a cleaner, less dilapidated place. Staff feel that this has helped decrease the overall stress in her life. Steve, the agency psychologist, has counseled her, and offered to go to Alcoholics Anonymous with her. She has not taken him up on this offer; however, staff also feel she is currently drinking less than she has in the past. Andrea attends the agency's Parents' Group, a weekly support group meeting for mothers. Agency staff report that they have "encouraged her for years to take more responsibilities--and she seems to be doing more now." Bonnie goes with Andrea to the Individualized Education Program meetings for Ed. And, she is getting out of the house more, particularly with visits to her mother.

Project RESCUE found a volunteer to spend time with Ed. This volunteer has enabled him to go more places, such as the Boys Club and sporting activities, and they feel this volunteer relationship has also helped improve his behavior and his self-esteem.

Volunteers

Carol is the agency staff person responsible for recruitment, coordination, and support of volunteers. The agency uses volunteers both as a way of supplementing the work that outreach workers do (for children, or members of a family they are involved with who are not labeled as mentally retarded), as well as to be companions or friends. There are currently a total of 25 agency volunteers. Carol recruits volunteers through her personal connections, those of other agency staff, and her contact with other volunteer agencies throughout the city. She recruits volunteers for different types of relationships, ranging from big brothers or sisters, to tutors, to companions, and so on, depending on the person in question. Over time, she has learned, "It's generally much harder to find volunteers for adults than for children." She stays in regular and frequent contact with the volunteers in order to help answer questions, and keep track of how things are going and how the relationship is developing between the two people. For instance, she commented about Fred, a young man who was a volunteer who spent time with Eric, a young man in his early 20s. "It's too bad he's leaving town...He really liked Eric...He wasn't just doing a charity thing."

One of the volunteers is Christa, a woman who spends time with Becky, a 15 year old girl with Down syndrome who is labeled moderately mentally retarded. Christa is currently coordinator of the Atlanta "I Have a Dream" program, in which a local sponsor has offered to pay college expenses for a class of students who are now in fifth grade at one of the inner-city schools.

Christa used to work in the area of family planning, at the Grady Hospital in Atlanta. She then decided to go back to school at Georgia State to get a Master's in Mental Health and Human Services. In 1986, she did a practicum at Project RESCUE with a focus on the issue of women's sexuality. This led to her involvement with Becky. She commented, "After the practicum was over, I stayed involved with Project RESCUE because of Becky."

Becky's family situation is a difficult and problematic one. According to staff at Project RESCUE, "Becky's mother is strung out on cocaine...her grandmother mostly takes care of the kids...and she's been sexually abused by an uncle who lives with the family." Staff report, however, that the Children's Protective Division will not get involved since "she has a disability...and she's black and poor." As one possible means of protection, agency staff have talked with other family members about not leaving Becky alone in the house with this uncle.

Christa lists a few reasons why she has remained involved with Becky as a Project RESCUE volunteer. These include, "because I like doing things with young people...and she's a loveable person...and because she didn't have many people who were spending quality time with her." They get together about twice a month, and do mostly "fun things" like going shopping, going to church, or going to

Christa's house for dinner. Overall, one of Christa's objectives is to "build a relationship with Becky and her family."

Carver Project

One of the agency's special projects involves a focus on the Carver housing project, a 990 unit housing project considered by agency staff to be one of the "war zones" of the city. They obtained a small amount of grant funding from the Metro United Way to pay several residents of Carver to assist some people with disabilities who live there. The agency had been looking for funding for three years for this project. Harriet, formerly one of the Outreach Supervisors, is the coordinator of this project. She has worked at Project RESCUE since it began in 1969.

Currently, there are five people with disabilities who receive support. These people all have contact with outreach workers, but were considered to need both additional support and connections. Harriet found neighbors to do this by attending the Tenants Association meeting, and making contacts with other groups, such as the day care center, and individuals. Funding can pay for the neighbor to provide assistance for up to 60 hours per month.

Tina is one of the people who receives support from a neighbor, Susan, at Carver Homes. Tina has mild mental retardation as well as some mental health problems. Susan spends a few hours a week with Tina helping her to clean her house, do errands, and also "by just being a friend." On occasion, Tina will get upset and tell Susan to leave the apartment. At first, Susan didn't know how to react to this. Harriet has helped her with this, and reports, "Now Susan's fine with

it, and if Tina throws her out she'll just go back later." Overall, agency staff feel that this relationship with Susan has made a tremendous difference in Tina's life. As Harriet put it, "If it weren't for Susan, Tina would likely be in the institution or in jail...People at the Mental Health Center think she belongs in an institution."

Harriet is currently seeking a neighbor to give some assistance to Stephanie, a 22 year old woman who is labeled mildly mentally retarded and legally blind. She has two children, Barb, who is 7 months old, and Jeff, who is 18 months old. Previously, Stephanie lived in a condemned building with Jeff. The Division of Family and Child Services was involved, and was considering taking Jeff away from her. Project RESCUE staff helped her move to Carver Homes, which is still not very desirable due both to safety issues as well as her continued lack of furniture and shortage of food, but it is a step up from the previous place. Her outreach worker, Marj, has helped her with her applications for financial aid and food stamps, has taught her some parenting skills, and helped her deal with DFCS. Staff at Project RESCUE have attempted to help her get medical care for her glaucoma, which she currently does not want. They have helped her get medical care for Barb, who has similar eye problems. The agency has found a volunteer for Jeff, a family who has more resources than Stephanie and helps provide Jeff with toys and clothing. They are currently seeking a neighbor in Carver Homes to assist Stephanie with care for her children as well as to engage in activities with the children.

Quality Assurance

On the formal, service system level, there are a few mechanisms for monitoring and quality assurance. Service statistics are reviewed by the agency's Board of Directors, as well as other funders including the United Way and the state Department of Human Resources.

As a means of internal evaluation, every three years the agency has a PASS (Program Analysis of Service Systems) or other type of team come in to lead staff in evaluation and/or reflection. In addition, they ask graduate students from the local university to assist people in filling out a "consumer feedback questionnaire" as a means of allowing them to give anonymous commentary and evaluation of the supports and assistance they receive.

Overall, however, staff feel that the best quality assurance for people comes not from the service system but from relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. Therefore, one of the primary emphases of support is to help people develop and expand these types of relationships and community connections.

AGENCY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

In the course of their work, Project RESCUE staff face a number of very difficult situations and challenging issues on a daily basis. Five of these include: values issues; issues of race and oppression; poverty issues; women's issues; and service system issues. The ways in which the agency approaches and deals with each issue are commendable. Each will be discussed briefly below.

Values Issues

The work that goes on at Project RESCUE is rooted in a strong Christian/religious values-base, with emphasis on the importance of family relationships, and experiencing a sense of community. These values influence the way staff members relate to one another as well as to the people with disabilities to whom they give support. As a group of staff, they spend time together at retreats, as well as in regular staff meetings, discussing values issues and dilemmas. In terms of support for people, some of the common principles that guide their work include respecting the right of families to make decisions, and the right of people to integration. Also, as the director put it, "We believe people have the right to stability and meaningful things to do during the day, and try to help people attain these."

Values play a strong role in the kinds of support that agency staff give to people. Value is placed on relationships and community--hence, staff spend time developing positive relationships with the people they support, and spend significant time and resources assisting people to have other relationships and community connections. Value is placed on meaningful experiences and lives--therefore, in the midst of great poverty, staff assist people to have quality, integrated experiences and to have opportunities for vacations and celebrations.

As Diane, the Director, noted, "Our values do affect the way we serve people." One of the situations that is perhaps most challenging to the agency is the Thomas family, whose house, according to staff members, is so unclean, and in such bad condition that it both violates both agency values and personal values of individual staff members. Staff also feel that it poses a potential health and safety threat to the

members of the family. The 10 year old son, Mark, was referred to Project RESCUE by Child Protective Services. His mother is labeled mildly mentally retarded. The family also includes Mark's father and sister. Staff at Project RESCUE describe Mark as being very overweight, selectively mute, and as having poor hygiene. They describe Mark's mother, Glenna, as having poor hygiene, not in good health, overprotective of Mark, and as wanting to keep her children. The sister has poor hygiene and is overweight, while the father is severely disabled after a stroke and, according to staff members, "spends a lot of time yelling at everybody." They also note a number of issues about the house as a whole--that there are unwashed dishes all over, it is infested with roaches, has the smell of urine, sometimes has feces smeared on the walls and floor, and has a general lack of space for everybody.

The agency characterizes the Thomas's as having a "strong sense of family," but have had difficulty providing support to them. For instance, there have been five different outreach workers who have each not been able to deal with the situation. Staff have tried a number of different strategies to assist the family, including family counseling, medical help, giving assistance to Glenna with shopping and food preparation, having someone assist them with house cleaning, use of visiting nurses, and so on.

At this point, staff at Project RESCUE have spent significant time at meetings brainstorming ideas and options. Currently, they see three potential options: (1) to do major work with Glenna; (2) to petition the court to remove Mark, who appears to be in the most vulnerable position; or (3) close the case, with the thought that

perhaps the family does not desire or want continued involvement by the agency. The pursuit of any of these options will not be easy for the agency. And, an example such as this is a reminder to them, that even with the utilization of considerable staff time and resources, they are not always able to figure out how to best assist people, and that they don't have all the answers.

Race and Oppression

Many people supported by Project RESCUE are subjected to oppression and discrimination based on race, in addition to disability. This issue is addressed in a number of ways. For one, the agency's mission statement recognizes people's rights to equality and nondiscrimination. And, further, staff spend time on a daily basis advocating for people's rights, and providing advocacy and direct services to those who are rejected by other agencies, at least sometimes because of race.

Agency staff members are concerned about the suspicions and fears that are common in relationships between black and white people in our society. In order to deal with this on an agency level, at staff meetings they spend time discussing the many different types of oppression that exist in our society, and attempt to acknowledge and recognize each person's individual experience of oppression--whether black or white, male or female. At the very least, this helps increase their understanding and awareness of the existence and experience of racism and oppression. And, as an interracial staff, in the work they do as a group of staff as well as with the people they support, they provide a positive example of ways in which people can work together to build trust and understanding.

Poverty Issues

The poverty of the people the agency supports poses a significant challenge to agency staff. As the director put it, "The most serious issues we deal with have to do with poverty, not with disability...we probably spend about 30% of our time on disability issues...People could get some real misconceptions about developmental disability from the poverty conditions of the people we work with." Staff approach the issue of poverty from a social justice perspective, rather than just a disability perspective. This allows them to see the lives of people they support in a broader context--that their problems are similar to those of many other people, not just others labeled mentally retarded; and that the solutions involve societal change, not just human service system change.

Because of this poverty, when they start serving a family, the issues of food, clothing, housing, shelter, and safety take first priority. Staff spend significant amounts of their time assisting people in these areas, either when they initially start to support people, or as crises occur in their lives. They think about the agency name, Project RESCUE, as being related to an attempt to "rescue" people from some of the effects of poverty, rather than from developmental disability. At the same time, they do not have any false illusions about really fixing people's lives forever, or eliminating the poverty. Yet, they recognize, "the poverty of people we serve limits their options; we try to expand the number of options and choices available to people."

Finally, as mentioned previously, it is notable that, in the midst of this poverty, staff try to assist people not only with obtaining food, clothing, housing and safety, but also to have meaningful experiences and relationships.

Support of Women by Women

Project RESCUE data indicate that the agency serves approximately 20 mothers who are labeled mentally retarded. And, that 10% of the people the agency serves are women who are involved in dependent relationships with men who abuse or exploit them.

The agency provides support groups for the mothers--both those labeled mentally retarded and those without labels. Staff also make an effort to both assist women to recognize the ways they are being abused and exploited, and to help them have or see increased options for themselves to make choices about whether to stay in the situation, or what might be done about it.

In addition, the agency staff is composed almost entirely of women. In their daily work with the agency, these women (and the male staff) place themselves in situations which potentially pose some danger--working in areas of high crime, violence, and drug activity. As the Director put it, "Danger is a real issue for our staff." For example, one staff member related a story about another, saying, "There was one family...every time Bonnie went to the door, a man answered with a gun." However, over all, staff members have not been attacked, and almost none have left the job because of the danger involved.

Agency staff identify a lack of positive male role models in the lives of many people who they support. They are limited in what they can do about this as an agency because of the very few numbers of men who work with them. However, overall, one gets the sense that Project RESCUE staff are able to do most of what they want to do, and go most places they want to go, because of the fact that they are women. Perhaps part of this is that they are not seen as being as threatening to the household members because they are women, and because of this are able to establish the relationships and rapport which are necessary in order to help support people.

Service System Issues

Staff at Project RESCUE function in a system which provides almost no community-based supports to adults with developmental disabilities. If they do not live at home with their parents, most all children and adults with severe disabilities live in institutions. The few more community-based supports that exist are still very segregated.

Project RESCUE staff come into daily contact with many people who have a multitude of needs. When they see a need, they want to try to do something about it. They try, first, to refer people to existing services rather than create new ones. At the same time, they do not like to refer people to segregated services. Because there are almost no other options, this has left the agency staff with the alternative of trying to create other options themselves. Some of this involves expanding the types of supports that agency staff provide to include a broad range of needs such

as family support services, service coordination, respite, transportation, support in work and leisure settings, counseling, support groups, and so forth. It also includes the development of a food pantry and clothing closet at the Project RESCUE office to help provide for people who do not have access to any other source for these items.

The existence of so much need creates dilemmas for staff regarding how many of these needs they will be able to meet for any one person, and how many people altogether they will be able to serve in a quality fashion. They have chosen to limit the total number of people they serve, in order to better serve each individual or family that they do serve. Also, rather than limit what types of supports they will provide to an individual or family, based on people's needs they have chosen to try to do whatever they can to meet whatever needs people have, in order to best assist them to be integrated and have meaningful lives.

Though the agency provides many types of services and refers people to others, in many ways staff members feel that the service system is not the answer for people. As one staff member put it, "The well's dry in services...In a lot of ways, we've given up on services...they hurt people, or do worse, or do nothing..." This is why they try to place a significant emphasis on building neighborhood connections and relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of overarching strengths of Project RESCUE that enable the agency to provide the type of support it does to people with disabilities in inner-city Atlanta.

One of the primary strengths of the agency is the values which are the basis for their work. These values both keep them going when they otherwise might get frustrated or discouraged, and help guide the way when they attempt to address challenging issues such as those discussed in the previous section. Staff members recognize that there are no easy solutions, and they don't pretend to have all the answers for people. While they try not to preach or impose their values on the people they support, they recognize that their values do affect the ways in which they provide support. But, they do spend significant staff time challenging themselves to struggle with difficult issues for which there are no single or simple answers.

Second, staff members are highly committed to the people they assist, and to the agency as a whole. As one staff member pointed out, "We serve a lot of people who have had bad experiences with the system; it takes a long time to establish trust." Yet, staff spend significant amounts of time building trust with people, and this results in the positive relationships that exist between agency staff and the people they support, some of which have continued both formally or informally for 15-20 years. A key factor is the way staff regard those they support with tremendous respect and dignity. And, it is in part because of these relationships that staff are so committed and maintain their support of people through crises and other difficult times. Agency staff recognize the potential for creating dependence on them by the people they help support, particularly in situations where they may be considered to be the only person in someone's life on a consistent basis or the only person who cares and is a friend. They remind themselves that they "can't do it all"

for the people they support. And, they see their role, in part, as one of assisting people to develop and maintain connections with family, neighbors, and friends. As one outreach supervisor put it, "It is important to have an outreach worker who gets other people involved with the person they're working with."

A third strength of the agency is that staff members try to base their supports on the priorities of the individual or family in question. The amount of time that staff spend with people, and what types of supports they provide, can change over time, depending on the person's or family's needs and interests. For example, when asked how often she visited people, one outreach worker responded, "I see some people once a month; others once a day--if that's what they need...I prioritize which ones to see by their needs." This flexibility is particularly crucial in giving staff the capacity to respond to crises in people's lives. It also allows staff to encourage the person with disabilities (and his or her family) to make more choices and decisions about what is important for them.

A fourth strength is the emphasis on building and increasing the relationships and meaningful experiences for people with disabilities. They feel that a sense of community, and inclusion and participation in community life is important for all people--and try to help create community around people labeled as disabled. They recognize the importance of vacations, holidays, and celebrations in all people's lives--and assist the people they support to have such opportunities and experiences.

Staff do spend time advocating and arranging for services for the people they support--but there is the recognition that services are not enough, that the service

system cannot ensure quality and meaning in people's lives. Thus, they seek to assist people to build or strengthen relationships with family, friends, and neighbors, and to develop additional connections in their neighborhood and community. Part of the role of direct support staff is to help build connections and relationships for the people they assist. One way they do this is by getting to know people in the neighborhood themselves. As one staff member put it, "It's important for us to develop a presence..." Staff then use their own connections to further integrate people with disabilities.

Project RESCUE serves people with developmental disabilities who have major issues in their lives related to poverty, racism, exploitation, and abuse--people whom many other agencies refuse to serve. Staff begin by encouraging people to dream about what they want in their futures--and then, put staff time and resources into helping some of these dreams become reality. They recognize that there is still a lot of poverty, exploitation, and abuse in people's lives. The key to why they are able to continue their work--and retain a high level of commitment to it--is the hope they have for people. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "No greater tragedy can befall a people than to be circumscribed to the dark chambers of pessimism." The people who staff support are those whom everyone else in the service system has given up on. In contrast to the tragedy of pessimism, at Project RESCUE one can clearly see the triumph of hope. What keeps staff going is the strength and resilience they see in the people they support, and their hope for people. It is not a belief that they can "fix" people or make everything better. Rather, they define success as the expansion of people's options and choices, and the creation of increased meaningful

experiences and relationships. With this as a measure of success, staff at Project RESCUE are making a significant difference, on a daily basis, in the lives of the people they help support.

For more information on Project RESCUE, contact:

Mary Yoder, Director

Project RESCUE

Suite 105, 215 Lakewood Way, S. W.

Atlanta, GA 30315

404-622-5343